

**Three Poems from *An Adelaide Boy*
(a verse novel in progress)**

Passing through the Suez Canal

People say there isn't much to see
 along the shoreline of the Suez Canal
 but I don't think they were looking.
 Peering over the deck rail
 I saw the desert sands shifting
 and sunken ships that might block our passage
 through the expanse of bisque and blue.
 Only three years since the crisis
 I could feel the eyes of troops upon us
 I'm sure I saw a soldier or two with rifles
 slung over their shoulders, and I know there were tanks
 glinting darkly in afternoon sun.
 Here and there were patches of lush green
 like little oases in a parched land
 an obelisk of petrified sand
 its shadow pointing to the calm surface
 a convoy of colourful cargo boats
 the wings of white sea birds.
 And from my imagination
 a mirage of pyramids
 shimmering in the distance.

One Christmas

Despite my father having two trades
 and full employment, our cupboards echoed
 I wore my mother's shoes to school; I went to bed hungry.
 There were debt collectors at our door
 the television was repossessed
 bills screwed into tight balls littered the kitchen floor
 the electricity often went off.

One Christmas my father answered my mother's despair
with a .22, which he slung across the back yard fence
to kill one of the neighbour's turkeys.
Whether his silhouette was seen
hauling that dead turkey over the palings
or the aroma of roasting flesh aroused suspicion
I don't know. All I know is that my gentle brother Adolph took the rap
when the detectives came, it was he who stepped forward
in the face our father's denial and did the time...and paid the fine.

That turkey meat tasted damn good but I can't eat it now
without the taste of guilt and shame.

Otherwise silence

All afternoon, at school
my stomach feels as though
I'm going down fast in a lift.
Trees outside the classroom window
are unnaturally still
I am trapped and restless
cannot concentrate on words and equations,
dictation doesn't make sense
nothing adds up.
I'm unable to snap out of it
as the teacher suggests
with a harsh rap of the yard stick
across my desk.

At the afternoon bell I bolt
across asphalt and dried grass
to jump the fence and hurry home
to a house I already sense is empty
door left open, flyscreen unlatched
a blowie buzzing around the kitchen
unwashed dishes in the sink.
Otherwise silence.

I run for my bike and yank it up out of the dust
throw my leg over and pedal like fuck
I don't think about the destination
as I race along hot half-shaded streets
where the only sounds are crow calls
ark...arkkk...farrrrkkk
and my own rapid breathing
the clicking spokes of bike wheels

at the last corner, the snap and clang
of a broken chain
and I'm sure I hear a distant train.

The two tracks are rusty with grief
they glint under the haze of heat
over scrub and stones
following a trail of litter along the mesh fence
there's no-one on the platform to my left
but turning right I see a sweep of fabric
veiling the track, my mother's battered handbag
my baby brother clamped to her chest.

My mother is a dead weight I cannot drag.
I scream at her deaf ears and don't understand my own voice
I wrestle the baby from her and grasp the oil streaked pleats
of her dress, which tear untidily and reveal her bare legs
the rest of the scene is a blank in a recurring nightmare
somehow there is a sudden light in those haunted eyes
and an end to resistance, just moments (it seems)
before the train signals its approach
and the rails vibrate with reality
in the unreal suburb of my fear
where my mother, clutching a dusty handbag
wheels my broken-chained bike along late afternoon streets
asking me "How was school?"
while I hold my brother tight and kiss his fair head
and the train lurches on toward its destination
and we never speak of it again
otherwise, silence.

Deb Matthews-Zott